



Tu BiShvat 2022

Tu BiShvat Through the Ages

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF TU BISHVAT? FOUR RESPONSES

Tu BiShvat is a unique day on the Jewish calendar. Some have called it Jewish Arbor Day because of its focus on trees. But over the centuries different groups of Jews have explained its meaning and observed it in different ways. What will you do on Tu BiShvat?

1: RABBIS OF THE MISHNA

We are the Rabbis of the Mishna, living in Israel at the time of the Temple. To us, the observance of *halacha*, Jewish law, is the most important thing. The observance of *halacha*, given in part by G-d and expanded upon by the great and holy prophets and rabbis over the generations, is what G-d wants of us. We love the *halacha* because it has made the lives of the Jewish people meaningful and kept us together since the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

What is the meaning of Tu BiShvat to us? It is special because it is part of the *halacha*. You see, G-d commanded the Jewish farmer living in Israel to give tithes (holy gifts) to the Levites, the poor, and the Temple. These are called *terumot* and *ma'aserot*. Each year the orchard farmer must faithfully measure and set aside the prescribed portion of his crop for the tithe.

Furthermore, the Torah demands that we wait three years after a sapling is planted to taste its fruit. Until the tree has firmly taken root and matured, its fruit is forbidden, and it is called *orlah* (unfinished). Then, in the fourth year we celebrate the seasons' fruit, *neta revai*, by bringing it to Jerusalem and eating it as part of a thanksgiving feast. Only in the fifth year does it become part of general consumption.



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To properly observe these *halachot*, it was up to us rabbis to determine for the farmer exactly when the crop year begins. We went to the fields and orchards and studied the plant life and found that each year's tree growth begins when the sap begins to rise in the trees on the 15th of Shevat. So, we said let the 15th of Shevat be established as the New Year for Trees.

It became *halacha* that fruit grown before the 15th of Shevat was tithed for the previous year and fruit that came out after that would count for the next year. Also, the owner of a fruit tree must wait until the 15th of Shevat passed three times until the fruit could be eaten in any form.

In conclusion, to us, the rabbis of the Mishna living in Israel at the time of the Temple, for whom *halacha* is the most important thing, the importance of Tu BiShvat is the role it plays in Jewish law each year.

TEXT

Tractate Rosh Hashanah Chapter I; Mishna I:

There are four New Year days: The first of Nissan is New Year for (the ascension of) Kings and for (the regular rotation of) festivals; the first of Elul is New Year for the cattle-tithe, but according to R. Eliezer and R. Simeon, it is on the first of Tishrei. The first of Tishrei is New Year's Day, for counting years, and for Sabbatic years and jubilees. On the first day of Shevat is the New Year for trees, according to the school of Shammai; but the school of Hillel says it is on the 15th of the same month.

- Which of the New Years is also for the purpose of determining the tithe?
- What was the opinion of the school of Shammai regarding the New Year of the trees?

Explain the Terms:

Halacha -

Terumot and *Ma'aserot* -

Orlah -

Neta Revai -



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2: KABBALISTS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

We are the Kabbalists of the Middle Ages. We live in Israel and are scattered throughout the diaspora. We see the Torah and *halacha* through mystical lenses. To us, *halacha* is not just about practices and customs, but about coming in contact with the divine. We view every letter of Torah and every mitzvah as if it contained a hidden meaning.

What is the meaning of Tu BiShvat to us? It is as the Mishna says: the New Year of the Trees. But we do not see it merely as a date to inform the farmer of his responsibility to provide the tithes. We see it as a day to appreciate the holiness of the creation. Tu BiShvat gives us an opportunity to connect to G-d through the wondrousness of nature's produce.

Over the centuries, across many lands, customs have arisen based on the Kabbalistic understanding of Tu BiShvat. There are those whose Tu BiShvat observance is centered around the study of Torah portions that deal with trees and fruits. Others introduced the recitation of special prayers called *piyutim*, composed on the theme of G-d and nature, in honor of the occasion. Many included eating a variety of fruits, especially those seven mentioned in the Torah as the native plants grown in the land of Israel. Some even included the elements of prayer, study, and food in an order, and created the Tu BiShvat Seder.

So, to us, the Kabbalists of the Middle Ages living in Israel and scattered throughout the diaspora, Tu BiShvat is a New Year for Trees as holy and filled with spiritual significance as Rosh Hashanah itself. Whether through prayer, Torah study, or tasting the fruit, it is a day to appreciate the holiness of the creation. Tu BiShvat allows us to connect to G-d through the wondrousness of nature.

TEXT

Avoth DeRabbi Nathan' b' ch.31

Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai said: "If you have a sapling in your hand and are told that the Messiah has arrived - plant the sapling and then go to greet him."

- Why do you think many people find this statement to be puzzling?
- How do you understand Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai's statement?

Explain the Terms:

Kabbalists -

Diaspora -

Piyutim -



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3: CHALUTZIM OF MODERN ISRAEL

We are the chalutzim, the pioneer builders of the modern State of Israel. With faith in the strength and resilience of the Jewish people and the land of Israel, we returned to our ancestral homeland. What we found was a diamond in the rough. Our once proud cities, forests, and fields lay in ruin. So, with shovel and pitchfork in hand, we dedicated ourselves wholly to resuscitating the dream.

What is the meaning of Tu BiShvat to us? The month of Shevat brings with it the rebirth of nature in the spring. Each year, inevitably out of the bleakness of winter emerges the colorful sight of budding almond trees. Shevat gave us chalutzim hope that the rebirth of the Jewish people too was inevitable. Every sapling symbolized the displaced Jew, who when returned to the soil of his ancestors, would take root firmly and grow tall, healthy, and strong. Every tree that grew symbolized new strength and hope for the Jewish people.

Eventually, the fields yielded their harvest, the orchards gave forth their fruit, and the forests stood tall. The Jewish people returned from all over the world and joined us in the dream. Then, in 1951, Israel's parliament, the Knesset, honored our achievements and declared the 15th of Shevat, Tu BiShvat, as a national holiday to be observed each year. On Tu BiShvat, as the spring dawns across Israel, Israelis go out to the forests and fields to marvel at the beauty of the land and to plant new trees. Jews worldwide join in through their support of the Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael, The Jewish National Fund, by buying trees and sponsoring forests in Israel.

So, to us, the chalutzim, pioneer builders who returned to a neglected homeland and planted trees and orchards, Tu BiShvat is a day of celebration recalling the ancient tradition of the New Year of the trees and the modern-day achievements of those who rebuilt the land. It is a proud day as we witness the dream of a vibrant, healthy nation come true.

TEXT

In 1949, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion said:

"Of all the blessed acts in which we are engaged in this country, I do not know if there is a more fruitful enterprise, whose results are so useful, as the planting of trees, which adds beauty to the scenery of our country, improves its climate, and adds health to its inhabitants."

Did Ben-Gurion share the same beliefs about the value of trees as the chalutzim did? Explain.

Explain the Terms:

Chalutzim -

Knesset -

Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael -



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4: DIASPORA JEWS OF TODAY

We are today's Diaspora Jews. We live all over the world as proud citizens of the nations we are part of. We express our religion in many different ways. As we are more universal than our ancestors, our concern is for Israel, sure, but it also for the country of our birth and the entire world.

What is the meaning of Tu BiShvat to us? In addition to being a day that recalls our connection to the land of Israel, it is a day to focus on ecology and our environment. In the United States and around the world, concerned people are urgently taking up the cause of preserving our world. They fear that if we don't do something now it will soon be too late. We modern Jews join them and bring to the discussion the time-honored Jewish value of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, which informs us of the holiness of caring for our world and the mitzvah of doing our part for the ecology movement.

Whether it's conserving energy, recycling, cleaning up, or speaking up, individual Jews and their communities are doing their part. Many families, synagogues, and Jewish schools take advantage of Tu BiShvat as a time to teach their members about the importance of *tikkun olam* and caring for our environment. Can you think of something you can do to repair the world? Do you know what opportunities there are to help the environment in your community? We believe that modern Jews must make it a priority to make Tu BiShvat about the environment and *tikkun olam*.

So, to us, modern Jews living in the United States and around the world, as part of the country of our birth, Tu BiShvat is about caring for our planet. Our religion teaches us about the importance of *tikkun olam* and we join the worldwide movement to address the task of preserving our environment.

TEXT

Midrash

When G-d created the first human being, G-d led Adam around the Garden of Eden and said, "Behold my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! All that I have created, for your sake did I create it. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy my world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you."

- Does this Midrash seem like it was written in today's times? Explain.
- What environmental problems do you think the rabbis of 2,000 years ago saw that inspired them to write this Midrash?

Explain the Terms:

Universal -

Tikkun olam -



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